DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 912 TM 870 325

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TITLE The Use of Volunteers in Evaluation and Research Studies.

INSTITUTION Child and Family Service, Hartford, CT.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Jan 87
GRANT 90-CW-0721
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cooperation; Family Programs; *Foster Care; *Interviews; Motivation; Participant Characteristics; *Program Evaluation; Recruitment; *Research Administration; State Surveys; Voluntary Agencies; *Volunteers; *Volunteer Training
IDENTIFIERS Connecticut; Flexibility (Attitude); Monitoring

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses issues important to maintaining a volunteer effort in research and evaluation studies. The Research Department of Child and Family Services, a private agency in Connecticut, conducted a statewide study of children and youth in long-term foster care. Eighty-seven volunteers, mainly from the Junior League, were recruited to interview foster parents in 450 foster families. The volunteers were given two and one-half hours of training, and each volunteer was to complete ten interviews over a six-month period. Fourteen percent did not complete any interviews and only 21 percent of the group trained completed ten interviews. Volunteers completed brief, written questionnaires before and after the interviewing to determine their attitudes toward foster care and changes in their perceptions. The interviewing was perceived as a positive experience by the volunteers. The use of volunteers in this research was successful because of the volunteers' motivation, their interest in the topic, strong monitoring techniques, positive relationship between staff and volunteers, and staff flexibility. In assessing whether volunteers are a viable resource for a research project, the following issues need to be considered: recruitment, attrition, training, and monitoring of the volunteers; and the flexibility of the research staff. (JAZ)

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The Use of Volunteers in Evaluation and Research Studies

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January 1987

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Supported by Grant # 90-CW-0721, Department of Health and Human Services

Abstract

The use of volunteers in evaluation and research studies is increasingly attractive when budgets are tight. A recently completed study, involving nearly 100 volunteers who conducted individual one-hour interviews with parents of foster children in long-term care, gave insight into a number of areas: how to recruit, train, and manage volunteers; changes in attitude as a result of the volunteer experience; and the advantages and pitfalls of using volunteers. Guidelines are suggested for the optimum utilization of volunteers in research studies.

The Use of Volunteers in Evaluation and Research Studies

There is a rich literature documenting the use of volunteers in a variety of social and human services endeavors. Rape crisis services, hospice programs, victim offender projects, and suicide prevention programs, among others, have developed in recent years as creative utilizers of volunteer help (Thomas, 1982; Amenta, 1984; Martin, 1982). In research, volunteers traditionally have been recruited as subjects, but not often used in the conduct of studies. In an era of tight budgets, however, this utilization of volunteers is an increasingly attractive option.

The issues of importance in maintaining a volunteer effort, such as the volunteers' involvement and satisfaction, longevity of service, and attitudes about participation, have been studied for direct service providers. The findings indicate that initial motivation is a good predictor of successful volunteer participation (Jenner, 1984); that egoistic benefits in working with clients are correlated with longevity of service (Rubin & Thorelli, 1984); and that volunteers have greater social and service motivations, greater job satisfaction, and less intent to leave a job than paid employees (Pearce, 1983). There is little known, however, about how these factors would operate for volunteers in research and evaluation studies. How are the volunteers recruited, trained, and managed? Who makes the best volunteers for this purpose? Is there a change in the volunteers' attitudes about the issues under study? These and other related questions are addressed in this paper, which draws on an experience with volunteers in a study of children and youth in long-term foster care (Kluger et al., 1986).

THE STUDY

The Research Department of Child & Family Services, a private social service, child welfare, and mental health agency, received federal funding for a 17-month study of long-term foster care in the state of Connecticut. The study was designed to examine the characteristics of the children, families, and service systems; assess the children's functioning; determine the needs of the families; and identify emancipation issues. It was part of a series of studies on permanency planning for children and youth, which is the movement to keep children at risk of out-of-home placements in their own homes or place them with adoptive or other permanent families (Maluccio, et al., 1986).

Foster parents in over 450 foster families were to be interviewed in their homes. The federal request for proposal had promised preferential consideration for creative use of volunteers, and required a 25% non-federal match of funds. The response was to plan for volunteers to do the interviewing. By estimating that a paid interviewer would cost $15 per one hour interview, the 25% match requirement was met while fulfilling the volunteer guidelines.

There was some trepidation about relying on volunteers for such a crucial part of the study. Most were inexperienced in interviewing and would be required to relate to parents of a different socioeconomic status. Moreover, the leverage an employer has to weed out the poor performer would be missing. In order to perform the extensive analyses planned, however, data needed to be obtained from the whole population rather than a smaller sample and from an extensive interview rather than a brief telephone contact. Given the limited options, the risk of using volunteers seemed worth the gamble.

Recruitment

Aware of the activities of the Connecticut Junior Leagues on behalf of child welfare and family development projects, the study team approached the Leagues' officers with the proposal. The Junior Leagues are an international organization of women whose purposes are to promote volunteerism, develop the potential of its members for voluntary participation in community affairs, and demonstrate the effectiveness of trained volunteers. In Connecticut the Leagues have initiated and supported such projects as a community health clinic, a playroom for visiting children of imprisoned mothers, and a study of foster care. The study team attended several of the Leagues' meetings to describe the study and the need for committed and knowledgeable volunteers. Their state Public Affairs Committee agreed to support the project and obtained the participation of the presidents of each of the seven Connecticut Junior League chapters, who recruited volunteers at their chapter meetings. Each chapter had a volunteer designated as the liaison between research staff and the other volunteers in order to share supervisory tasks.

Because the study was statewide, other volunteers needed to be recruited in areas where Junior League participation was not sufficient. These volunteers included members of the Child & Family Services' Auxiliaries; Voluntary Action Centers and YWCAs; retired social workers; and personal acquaintances of the research team. The non-Junior League volunteers accounted for 20% of the 75 who completed interviews. All but one of the volunteers were female and ranged in age categories from 25-34 to 65 or over, with the average 35-44. Several were fluent in Spanish. Most were married (92%); they had an average of two children; and education levels ranged from high school completion to graduate degrees, with the average interviewer a college graduate. Over half the volunteers were unemployed, and 13% retired.

Training

All potential interviewers were required to participate in a two-and-a-half hour training session given by the research staff at 20 sessions in locations throughout Connecticut. Each volunteer was asked to commit to completing ten interviews over a six-month period. If they wished, interviews could be done in teams if the partner had also received the volunteer training.

The training material was modeled on the training packet used in two previous Child & Family Services research studies, "After Foster Care" (Fein et al., 1983) and "Reunification of Families After Foster Care" (Goetzel et al., 1982). Training sessions consisted of five sections:

- a project overview;
- review of terminology commonly used by foster parents and social workers e.g., DCYS (The Connecticut Department of Children and Youth Services), TPR (Termination of Parental Rights), foster family home, out-of-home placement;
- research interviewing guidelines, including:
  - the role of the research interviewer,
  - how to make appointments for interviews,
  - preparation prior to the interview,
  - establishing rapport with respondents,
  - answers to questions that might arise during interviews,
  - obtaining consent,
  - probing for and recording answers,
  - procedures to follow if abuse or neglect were suspected or observed,
  - confidentiality and research ethics;
- sensitivity to foster care and ethical issues, including:
  - foster parent concerns and frustrations with the child welfare system,
  - relationships between foster parents and biological families,

- fragile placements and disruptions,
- permanency planning policy,
- basic economic and social issues,
- the foster parent's role,
- foster children as "special needs" children,
- presence of foster children during interviews,
- observations of abuse or neglect;

- review of the one-hour interview instrument, consisting of a detailed examination of all items and role-playing opportunities.

At the end of the training volunteers were asked to sign a form stating that they had reviewed, understood, and would abide by the Child & Family Services Code of Research Ethics.

ATTRITION

The 75 interviewers came from an original group of 87 who received training. Thus, 14% did not complete any foster parent interviews, and of the 75 who completed interviews, nine (12%) did only one. The original request that each volunteer complete 10 interviews (with the exception of one Junior League chapter whose members were asked to do four interviews because they were only provisional members and had other service responsibilities), was fulfilled by 18 of the 87 people trained (21%), with one volunteer completing 29 interviews. It was necessary, therefore, to continue volunteer recruitment and training almost until the end of the data collection phase of the study.

The group of volunteers who did 0-4 interviews (48%) was similar to those who did at least five interviews (52%). (The provisional Junior League chap-

ter whose original commitment was to do four interviews was excluded from this analysis.) Neither the volunteers' age, educational level, employment status, type of job, nor number of children differentiated the groups. The volunteers' affiliation, however, was related to the number of completed interviews ($\chi^2(9)=21.89$, $p < .01$). Some chapters of the Junior Leagues, for example, had all their members completing at least five interviews, while one chapter had only 17% accomplishing that amount. Similar variability was found among the three Child & Family Services auxiliaries. Even personal recruitment did not guarantee compliance. Of the volunteers who were enlisted personally by project staff or people known to them, 25% completed fewer than five interviews.

Attrition seemed to be related to the success of the liaison people as supervisors of their volunteers. The study director's impression was that those committed to the study were more willing to spend time monitoring their group. Those who had accepted the liaison role because of pressure from a superior in the volunteer organization completed their own assignments but were reluctant to be responsible for monitoring others. Moreover, it appeared that some of the women who interacted socially were not eager to jeopardize a friendship by applying pressure to complete interviews.

OBTAINING COOPERATION

Working with volunteers is not much different from managing paid staff. Obvious amenities are useful in promoting cooperation: 1) expressing appreciation both formally and informally for each accomplishment; 2) recognizing the realities of the volunteers' time pressures; 3) instilling in volunteers a sense of the importance of their task.

In this study it was found, as delays in completing interviews developed, that other techniques needed to be introduced. These included: 1) reducing time lags between interviewer training and assignments; 2) overloading rather than underloading volunteers when making assignments; 3) developing record-keeping systems to recall conversations and commitments; 4) using peer pressure with volunteers belonging to a group or organization; 5) selecting liaisons as subordinate supervisors; and 6) maintaining constant contact with the volunteers.

Tact and sensitivity always needed to be exercised with volunteers who could not meet their commitments or fulfill their promises, and a few such volunteers were encountered. Considering that dollars were not an incentive, the volunteers performed the bulk of the task as agreed upon. In order to accomplish it, however, modifications in the research plan were necessary. The deadline for completion of all interviews was extended to eight months from starting date from its original four months. Moreover, telephone interviews were begun when it became apparent the in-person interviews, which took longer to schedule, would not be completed. As a result, 34% of the interviews were by telephone. (Telephone interviews were 14 minutes shorter than the 60 minute in person interviews, and the foster parents were judged by the interviewer to have less understanding of the questions asked, although there were no differences in openness, articulateness, or perceptiveness about the child's feelings and relationships.)

In addition, it was important to have the interviews completed in a timely fashion so foster parent names, addresses, and telephone numbers, identified at the beginning of the study, would not become outdated. Therefore, the research staff needed to be flexible and conduct a number of the interviews themselves in order to have the deadline met. Although it meant taking time

from that allocated to data handling, analysis, and writing tasks, there was no other way to complete the work.

VOLUNTEERS' PERCEPTIONS OF FOSTER CARE

Volunteers were asked to complete brief written questionnaires before and after the interviewing experience, to determine their attitudes toward foster care and assess changes in perception. They were instructed to complete open-ended sentences as quickly as possible with whatever came to mind. The first 15-item questionnaire, distributed in person or by mail following the volunteers' training sessions, had a return rate of 82%. The second questionnaire, consisting of all the items in the first questionnaire plus additional questions on demographics and perceptions about the interviewing experience, was mailed after volunteers completed their assigned interviews, and had a return rate of 73%.

The responses to the two questionnaires were similar in many areas, but showed changes of perception in important elements. As a group, the volunteers' views about the values of foster care, reasons for children being in care, motivation for becoming a foster parent, and perceptions of the state agency did not change following their interviewing experience. The areas where their opinions did change were:

- their perception of the problem with foster care being its temporary nature (47% in questionnaire I and 34% in questionnaire II);
- their perception of a lack of state agency supports and services (7% in questionnaire I and 25% in questionnaire II);

- their views on the desireability of reuniting foster children with their biological parents (22% were negative in questionnaire I and 54% in questionnaire II);
- their belief that youngsters who had spent a large part of their lives in foster care would have problems (8% predicted no problems in questionnaire I and 16% in questionnaire II);
- their estimates of the number of foster children who had contact with their biological parents (38% in questionnaire I and 58% in questionnaire II; the actual number was 31%).

Another finding was that volunteers who had done at least five interviews differed from those who had done fewer than five in two respects that may indicate a sensitivity to the realities of foster care issues. In particular those who had completed at least five interviews were more were negative about the desirability of reuniting the children with their biological parents, and more felt that the appearance of problems caused by time in foster care would depend on the child.

Estimates of the prevalence of abuse and neglect as reasons for children being in foster care were remarkably similar for interviewers and foster parents. Both groups correctly felt about 10% were in care for abuse; however, while both groups felt neglect accounted for 11-16%, the true figure was 62%. This "neglect of neglect" is a problem even among professionals (Wolock and Horowitz 1985).

Most of the comments on the interviewing experience were positive, although nearly one in five found it difficult or disturbing compared to other volunteer work they had done. Almost half noted how caring and dedicated foster parents were. On the basis of what they had learned about foster care, volunteers said they would increase the amount of money that foster parents

receive (21%), place greater emphasis on the children and youth when assessing permanency planning needs (13%), increase the amount of contact between social workers and foster families by decreasing caseloads (11%), and make global improvements in the service delivery system such as reducing red tape and improving monitoring and follow-up of foster children and youth (11%).

In sum, the interviewing was perceived as a positive experience by the volunteers. It was educational for some, and changed many perceptions for others. Estimates that could be compared with actual numbers, such as amount of parent-child contact, however, were not any more accurate after the interviewing experience than they were before the interview with the foster families. This suggests that personal values have greater impact on perceptions than a limited "corrective" experience (Hilgard, Atkinson, and Atkinson, 1975). The misperceptions about foster care are common even among professionals, so it is not surprising that greater change did not occur in lay people.

DISCUSSION

Advantages of Using Volunteers

The benefit to the volunteers of participating in the research were documented in the questionnaires they completed. One-third described the foster parent interviews as "enlightening" or "eye-opening." The volunteers reported they obtained a better understanding of foster care needs and issues, were sensitized to a segment of the population they had not met before, and were better equipped to continue their advocacy work. Many gained new skills in interviewing.

The benefits to the research project were enormous. In addition to the free labor, the study findings were used as the Junior Leagues' Public Affairs

Committee planned its state legislative agenda for the following year. The research report was a link in bringing together the Junior Leagues and the state children's agency in a common planning task, since both had been involved in the study from its inception. Thus, dissemination and utilization of findings were the immediate result of the report's circulation.

Reasons for Success

The use of volunteers in research was successful in this instance for a variety of reasons:

- The volunteer groups had a strong interest in the topic under investigation. The results became part of their organization's agenda.
- The individual volunteers were a well-motivated group, well-educated, and committed to volunteerism as a concept.
- Strong monitoring techniques were devised.
- The research staff worked hard to maintain a positive and meaningful relationship with the volunteers.
- Recruitment of volunteers continued through most the data collection phase.
- The research staff was patient with the conditions of participation the volunteers brought to the task.
- The research staff was flexible enough to substitute for the volunteers when needed.

Issues and Difficulties

In assessing whether volunteers are a viable resource for a research project, particular issues need to be considered. They include:

- Recruitment. Volunteers should have some emotional connection to the research, either to the area under study or to the volunteer organization to which they belong which require their participation in a sponsored project. This is in accord with Jenner's (1984) findings about initial motivation and

commitment to the project as vital for success in using volunteers in direct service delivery.

- Attrition. More volunteers than estimated as necessary should be recruited and trained, since they are more likely to leave the job than paid employees. Selection criteria have been a subject of study with direct service volunteers with mixed results (Jenner, 1984; Rubin and Thorelli, 1984). In this experience, demographic characteristics were not helpful in predicting who would complete assignments. Some volunteers with the heaviest home and job responsibilities, for example, were the best performers.
- Training. Volunteers may need more training than students or professionals. On the other hand, they bring a breadth of experience and commitment not always available for wages. As when they provide direct service, volunteers trained in research techniques can perform as well as, or better than, paid employees (Thomas 1982; Pearce 1983).
- Monitoring. The resources necessary to monitor volunteers should not be minimized. Plans should be made to invoke sanctions for inadequate performance, although these cannot be punitive if good community relationships are to be maintained. The research staff need some alternatives to meet deadlines if volunteer commitments are not kept.
- Staff flexibility. Using volunteers requires filling in where they cannot produce what was promised, accepting interruptions in the flow of the research work, and spending time on communication and accountability problems. An understanding of the volunteers' priorities and how much can be imposed on them is particularly important if harmonious relationships are valued.

The cost in staff time and resources of using volunteers may not be reasonable for small studies. In major projects, however, volunteers may be the

best choice if funds are scarce. The circumstances that make the volunteers useful, however, must be carefully thought out and controlled. In many situations, they are a valuable resource whose nurturance can pay dividends in low cost labor and appropriate utilization of findings.

In short, while participation of volunteers in research should not be idealized and the costs in staff time minimized, the net result can be positive. One must add to the value of their labor their increased awareness of social issues, their deeper understanding of the complexities of social and research problems, and their reinforced commitment to social causes.

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